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Bulli, Giorgia

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Electoral Campaigning in the Italian 2013 Elections

Innovation and Tradition

GIORGIA BULLI

Introduction

The Italian electoral campaign in the 2013 general elections shows traits of an incomplete evolution of the Italian political communication towards a professionalized market-oriented model. Nonetheless, it can be considered as a turning point if we consider the innovations in the use of the Internet, web 2.0 and the modernization of many politicians' approach to the potentiality of the social media strategy.

The prevailing feature of the 2013 electoral campaign consists in the different approaches of the Italian parties to an understanding and adaptation of their traditional means of communication to the so-called third age of the political communication¹. The campaign environment in Italy has always been characterized by a great disparity in the interpretation of the "rules" of a professionalized campaign and the use of political consultants². Since the emergence of *Forza Italia* and its innovative approach to political marketing, the distance between the party founded by the television tycoon Silvio Berlusconi and the communication strategies of the other parties has always been relevant³. On the one hand, Berlusconi's *Forza Italia* has used highly professional strategies deriving from the communication consortium and the television channels owned by the leader of *Forza Italia*⁴, thus showing that the passage from the so-called First Republic to the Second Republic⁵ reflected not only the relevance of systemic factors such as the modification of the electoral law, but also the importance of the changing political culture of the Italian electorate. On the other hand, the traditional parties sharply criticized the new communication and organization model of *Forza Italia*, refusing to adapt to a modernized communication model.

With few exceptions, Italian parties have long been continuing to structure their political communication and electoral campaign on the organization model of the mass party based on low levels of voting dealignment. On the contrary, the in-depth

¹ Jay G. BLUMLER, Dennis KAVANAGH, "The Third Age of Political Communication: Influences and Features", *Political Communication*, no. 26, 1999, pp. 209-230.

² Angelo MELLONE, "Un approccio di successo? Il marketing politico e il caso italiano", in Angelo MELLONE, Bruce I. NEWMAN (eds.), *L'apparenza e l'appartenenza*, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2004, pp. 183-220; Giorgia BULLI, Stefania VIVOLI, "Alla ricerca degli uomini ombra. Un primo identikit del consulente politico italiano", *Polena*, no. 3, 2007, pp. 61-72.

³ Franca RONCAROLO, *Leader e media. Campagna permanente e trasformazione della politica in Italia*, Guerini Studio, Milano, 2008.

⁴ Donato BENDICENTI, *Con-vincere*, Donzelli, Roma, 2005, p. 155.

⁵ See Mauro CALISE, *La Terza Repubblica*, Laterza, Roma, 2006; Salvatore LUPO, *Antipartiti. Il mito della nuova politica nella storia della Repubblica (prima, seconda e terza)*, Donzelli, Roma, 2013.

electoral studies of the Italian general elections since 1994¹ revealed the existence of a so-called *fedeltà leggera* (i.e. a light fidelity within the coalitions) of the Italian electorate². This expression indicated a low electoral volatility between the two big "ideological" areas (center-left and center-right) and a higher volatility within the parties inside each of them.

The declining relevance of the ideological linkages expressed by the traditional parties made room for new political actors expressing the new imperatives: renewal of the political class, anti-establishment and anti-political feelings, populist stances. Combined with a new and more comprehensible – close to the people – political language made of sound bites³ and the use of the narrative⁴ and of the storytelling⁵, these new features gave rise to a new successful model consisting of personalization, spectacularization and dramatization of the once ideology-based political contents⁶.

In the two decades that have passed since the emergence of *Forza Italia*⁷ – and together with it, of the communication and campaigning models – the scenario hasn't changed significantly. Despite the fact that many parties and individual politicians have adopted the new winning formula of political communication, a pronounced disparity still exists between those parties that have actively interpreted the new phenomena of personalization and spectacularization, and those who firmly or partly refused this new model, identifying a "dangerous" affinity between a market-oriented approach to political communication and manipulation of the electorate⁸. This general description helps in identifying the prevailing features of the Italian 2013 general elections from a communication point of view: tradition and innovation. As we shall see, the center-left *Partito Democratico* (PD) led by Pierluigi Bersani focused on a traditional approach. As the leader of the party and the candidate for the center-left coalition, Bersani did not follow the political marketing rules normally adopted by the frontrunner of the electoral campaign⁹. Despite the fact that all opinion polls indicated the PD as the likely winner of the competition, the party decided to keep a "low profile", thus losing ground in favor of the real innovator of the Italian political communication since its appearance in the Italian political system: Beppe Grillo's *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S). As the radical interpreter of the electorate protest

¹ Stefano BARTOLINI, Roberto D'ALIMONTE (eds.), *Maggioritario ma non troppo. Le elezioni politiche del 1994*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1995; IDEM (eds.), *Maggioritario per caso. Le elezioni politiche del 1996*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1997; IDEM (eds.), *Maggioritario finalmente? La transizione elettorale 1994-2001*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2002.

² Paolo NATALE, "Una fedeltà leggera: i movimenti di voto nella seconda Repubblica", Roberto D'ALIMONTE, Stefano BARTOLINI, *Maggioritario finalmente? ...cit.*, pp. 283-317.

³ Daniel HALLIN, "Sound Bite News: Television Coverage of Elections, 1896-1988", *Journal of Communication*, vol. 42, no. 2, 1992, pp. 5-24.

⁴ Gianluca GIAN SANTE, *Le parole sono importanti. I politici alla prova della comunicazione*, Carocci, Roma, 2011.

⁵ Christian SALMON, *Storytelling. La machine à fabriquer des histoires et à former les esprits*, La Découverte, Paris, 2007.

⁶ Gianpietro MAZZOLENI, Anna SFARDINI, *Politica pop*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2009.

⁷ Leonardo MORLINO, Marco TARCHI (eds.), *Partiti e caso italiano*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2006; Aldo DI VIRGILIO, "Dal cambiamento dei partiti all'evoluzione del sistema partitico", in Leonardo MORLINO, Marco TARCHI (eds.), *Partiti e caso italiano*, cit., pp. 173-206.

⁸ Angelo MELLONE, "Un approccio di successo?...cit.".

⁹ Marco CACCIOTTO, *Marketing politico. Come vincere le elezioni e governare*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2011.

and the "megaphone" of people's resentments towards a political class unable to face up to the Italian economic and social crisis, and thanks to an innovative political communication based on the Internet, the M5S has been the central actor of the innovation process of the Italian 2013 campaigning.

There is no doubt that the 2013 general elections will be remembered for a long time. The results of the elections indicate the highest level ever – in the history of the Italian Republic – of voter mobility, even more than in the crucial 1994 elections. 39% of the Italian electorate changed party between 2008 and 2013¹. The rising electoral volatility and the de structuring of the Italian party system have never been so evident². This is due to the emergence of Beppe Grillo's M5S, which alone collected 25,6% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 23,6% at the Senate. Apart from the essential role played by Grillo's M5S, the above-mentioned features of innovation and tradition in the 2013 political communication appear in the activities of all the Italian parties in the election period, but also and perhaps more notably in the pre-election phase.

The article will be divided in four sections. The first section will deal with the description of the political scenario since the withdrawal of the Berlusconi government and the formation of the Monti technical government. The analysis will be focused on the principal political parties involved in this phase, *Popolo della Libertà* (PDL), the *Partito Democratico* (PD), and the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (M5S). The second section will analyze the most important innovation processes in the pre-electoral phase: the organization of the primary elections by the Democratic Party; the structuring of the political message by the M5S and its decision to adopt on-line primary elections to select the candidates for Parliament. The third section will be focused on the analysis of the main features of the campaign weeks. Here, the attention will be focused on the main parties and candidates, their communication strategies, the choice of issues, as well as an interpretation of the crucial "leader factor". Particular attention will be to the innovations introduced by the M5S electoral campaign, with its "winning formula" consisting of a combination of traditional communication and internet consultations. The final section will analyze the role played by the media, both traditional and new. Along with television, which maintained the central role in the information strategy of a majoritarian part of the electorate, the 2013 elections highlight the growing use of the Internet not only as an information tool by citizens, but as a mobilization instrument used by parties and politicians. As already stated, the rising of web 2.0 activism represents one of the main traits of innovation of the latest Italian electoral campaign. Concluding remarks will attempt to evaluate the relationship between innovation and tradition. If this admixture is typical for the so-called third age political communication, there can be no doubt that this unequal distribution of tradition and innovation among parties can represent an obstacle for the further professionalization of the Italian political communication.

¹ Paolo BELLUCCI, Paolo SEGATTI, "Introduzione", in ITANES, *Voto amaro. Disincanto e crisi economica nelle elezioni del 2013*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2013, p. 11.

² Roberto D'ALIMONTE, Aldo DI VIRGILIO, Nicola MAGGINI, "I risultati elettorali: bipolarismo addio?", in ITANES, *Voto amaro...cit.*, p. 22.

The Political Scenario

Rarely have Italian general elections been characterized by a climate of ordinary renewal of parliamentary representatives and government. The 2013 general elections are no exception from this point of view. The financial and economic crisis affecting the extra-European and European countries since 2008 has contributed to create a particularly hostile political environment until the end of the legislature. From the social point of view, some key data can help understand the feelings of uncertainty of a large part of the Italian population. In January 2013 – one month before the election – the statistical offices indicated 3 million unemployed (11,7% of the active population; 38,7% among the young people under 25)¹. Opinion polls showed that the most important problems perceived by the population in the 12 months before the elections were unemployment and economic uncertainty².

From the political point of view³, the creation of the Monti Government was due to the pressure applied on the Italian government by the European Union institutions. During the summer of 2011, the European Central Bank put pressure on the Italian government to increase deficit cuts and introduce substantial reforms in the labor market system, in the retirement policy, in the opening up of public services, as well as in the public administration. These were considered necessary steps to reduce the difference in macroeconomic indexes between the Italian and the more virtuous European economies.

The index of the financial "spread"⁴ was chosen by the Italian political media and by the political opposition as the symbolic representation of the ailing Italian economy. The continuous increase of the spread – daily reported by the media – was used to indicate the government's inability to manage the economic crisis.

The combination of the ongoing economic crisis and the diffuse perception of the government's inability to respond with clear policy-based answers to the requests of the European Union institutions resulted in an overwhelming sense of distrust towards the Italian political institutions, and the Government in particular. In this period, the parties fostered a climate of hyper-partisanship⁵, confirmed by the public interventions of President Napolitano, who eventually played a decisive role in the managing of the crisis. In the attempt to legitimize a highly respected figure at the European level, Napolitano appointed Mario Monti as senator for life, thus indirectly indicating the potential successor of Silvio Berlusconi as Prime Minister⁶.

Berlusconi resigned in November 2011, with a speech highlighting his sense of responsibility and the critical circumstances of the withdrawal of his government. The

¹ Nicoletta CAVAZZA, Piergiorgio CORBETTA, Michele ROCCATO, "L'impatto della crisi economica sul voto", in ITANES, *Voto amaro...cit.*, p. 159.

² *Ibidem*, p. 168.

³ Anna BOSCO, Duncan MC DONNELL, "Introduzione. Da Berlusconi a Monti: default dei partiti?", in IDEM, *Politica In Italia edizione 2012*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2012, pp. 43-63.

⁴ The difference between the yields of the Italian 10-year government bonds and those of the German bonds.

⁵ Anna BOSCO, Duncan MC DONNELL, "Introduzione. Da Berlusconi a Monti...cit.", p. 55.

⁶ Carlo FUSARO, "La formazione del governo Monti e il ruolo del Presidente della Repubblica", in Aldo DI VIRGILIO, Claudio M. RADAELLI (eds.), *Politica In Italia Edizione 2013*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2013, p. 87.

illegitimacy of appointing a new government without new elections was expressed by *Lega Nord*, the PDL ally in the center-right coalition, which denounced that once more the voice of the people had been ignored. In the Northern League perception, the only possible solution consisted in the renewal of the Parliament and the choice of a new elected government. The same position was expressed by Beppe Grillo's M5S, which criticized the Italian President¹. Some months before, Beppe Grillo himself had posted on his blog an open letter addressed to the President asking him to replace Silvio Berlusconi and call for new elections².

The other opposition parties, mainly the PD, emphasized Napolitano's skill in mediation, linking the extremely difficult Italian economic situation to the political decision not to initiate new elections, but to create a technocratic government entrusted with the implementation of the policies requested by the European institutions, and with the settlement of the long-debated reform of the electoral law.

As a matter of fact, the appointment of the Monti cabinet was a consequence of the international financial crisis. The cabinet was composed of unelected professionals and was therefore described as technocratic. The government could count on the parliamentary support of the center-left (*Partito Democratico*), the center-right (*Popolo della Libertà*), and the centrist "third pole" parties. As already stated, the circumstances of its birth have been largely criticized, not only by the Northern League and the *Italia dei Valori* (both parties voted against the creation of the party in the parliamentary debate) but also by the M5S, which at that time did not have any elected MP, but could count on a large public opinion consensus. Some days after the formation of the Cabinet, Grillo wrote in his blog:

"Citizen Monti,

You are highly legitimate for the function of Prime Minister. You have been appointed by the 'spread', not by Italians. You have the greatest luck to succeed the worst Italian government in the last 150 years. This government has been possible thanks to an unconstitutional electoral law. It is impossible to do worst. You apparently have free hands. You can decide (almost) everything".

These words express the overwhelming climate of political tension of the weeks preceding and immediately following Monti's appointment to the role of Prime Minister, the crucial decisions about the Ministers, as well as the public outline of the Government's reform program. These political tensions were somehow moderated in the first weeks after the birth of the new government by the sober political style of the new Prime Minister, that was welcomed by a part of the media and the opposition parties as a breath of fresh air after the continuous contrapositions among political rivalries, who had been for a long time divided by a sort of Berlusconi/anti-Berlusconi internal cleavage.

This situation did not last long. With the implementation of the first reforms in the labor market and in the retirement policies, the tensions started to explode again. The approaching of the natural end of the legislature provoked the exacerbation of the already existing political struggle, whose biggest beneficiary would be the M5S. In order to better explain the political climate that would have caused not only the

¹ http://www.beppegrillo.it/2011/11/la_fine_della_seconda_repubblica.html.

² http://www.beppegrillo.it/2011/07/lettera_a_giorgio_napolitano/index.html.

lowering of the turnout in the general elections (-5,3%), but the highest level ever of voter dealignment, we will turn now to describe the electoral strategies of the most important parties in the pre-campaign phase.

The Pre-Campaign Phase

The approaching of the end of the legislature made clear that the pre-campaign phase was to play a very important role in the strategy structuring of the main political parties. The analysis will be focused on the selection of candidates for the Prime Minister and MPs. We will concentrate on the main actors: the PD, the M5S, the PDL, and SC.

An overwhelming hostility towards the political parties and the political elite helped focus the news-media and political debate on the primary elections. Using such an instrument of selection both at the local¹ and at the national level was nothing new in the recent history of the PD. At the local level, primary elections have normally been competitive, with a real competition among the candidates. At the national level, the selection of a candidate for Prime Minister within the party or the coalition through primary elections had a function that was much more that of legitimization. Since the primary elections that established the candidature of Romano Prodi for the 2006 general elections, the prevailing aim of the primaries was not that of a real competition among candidates – since the result was predictable from the beginning² – but that of suggesting a wide participation of members and sympathizers of the party/the coalition, as well as the activation of internal democracy instruments within the parties.

For the 2013 general elections, the situation within the PD was more complicated. Despite the fact that in line with the party's statute the secretary general of the party was entitled to represent the party as candidate for Prime Minister³, the internal struggle between Pierluigi Bersani (the party Secretary) and the young Mayor of the city of Florence Matteo Renzi resulted in the organization of primary coalition elections with five candidates⁴. Thanks to a modification of the PD statute, the party was represented not only by Bersani, but by two other PD candidates: Matteo Renzi and Laura Puppato. The two other coalition candidates belonged to the left SEL (*Sinistra, Ecologia e Libertà*, led by Nichi Vendola) and the centrist API (*Alleanza per l'Italia*, Bruno Tabacchi).

Apart from the internal struggle and the never-ending disputes regarding the participation rules (who was entitled to vote; the choice of the electoral law), the primary elections represented a process of high mobilization and an indisputable communication success for the center-left. The media attention around the primary elections had been very high even before the effective campaigning period. As a

¹ Gianfranco PASQUINO, Fulvio VENTURINO (eds.), *Le primarie comunali in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2009.

² Pier Giorgio CORBETTA, Rinaldo VIGNATI, "The Primaries of the Centre Left: only a Temporary Success?", *Contemporary Italian Politics*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013, p. 83.

³ Gianfranco PASQUINO, Marco VALBRUZZI, "Primarie per il premier: la selezione dei candidate tra innovazione e manipolazione", in Aldo DI VIRGILIO, Claudio M. RADAELLI (eds.), *Politica In Italia...cit.*, p. 119.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 123.

matter of fact, Matteo Renzi had been acting on the national political scenario since 2011 to profile himself as a competitor to PD leadership. His message consisted of a set of limited and professionally communicated issues around the basic concept of the so called *rottamazione* (*scrapping*)¹: the necessity of a total renewal of the party's political establishment.

In order to strengthen his credibility, since the autumn of 2010 the Mayor of Florence had been organizing a national convention called *Leopolda*, named after the old railway station in Florence² where it was hosted. *Leopolda* soon became the synonym of political class innovation³. The need of a total renewal of the political class within the PD had been frequently carried out with anti-establishment arguments by Matteo Renzi, who had been using similar issues since his participation in the local primary elections that selected him as the official PD candidate for the seat of Mayor of Florence (February 2009).

Ever since then Matteo Renzi's use of political communication has highlighted key elements of professionalization and political marketing strategies. With an expert mixture of traditional and web 2.0 based news management, Matteo Renzi proved to be an able interpreter of his own narrative. The key elements of this narrative consisted in his youth; the pride he took in being an experienced politician despite his youth; the courage shown in running a solitary battle against the leadership of the party. All these elements were used in order to capture the electorate of the center-left by understanding their prevailing cognitive shortcuts⁴.

Despite Renzi's undeniable ability in collecting the protest potential within the PD, the favorite candidate remained the party leader, Pierluigi Bersani, who was sustained by the PD's middle cadres and local leadership. Not surprisingly, Pierluigi Bersani succeeded in the first two rounds of the primary elections⁵. With the participation of about 3.100.000 voters, the electoral campaign of the PD primaries was useful in giving the center-left electorate a wake-up call. They could be mobilized through the traditional tools of campaigning, but also through the organization of a widely followed television debate. 4.500.000 people watched the debate organized by the Sky TV channel⁶. The debate, as well as the media coverage before and after the event showed an evident personalization and spectacularisation of the political communication within the center-left parties, mainly the PD. This was certainly due to the impetus exercised by Renzi in the field of a personalized political communication,

¹ The expression "rottamazione" comes from the verb "rottamare", which means in Italian "dismantling old cars".

² There have been four editions of the *Leopolda* Convention: the first was held in November 2010, the second in October 2011, the third in November 2012, and the last one in October 2013.

³ Fabio BORDIGNON, "Matteo Renzi: A 'Leftist Berlusconi?' For the Italian Democratic Party?", *South European Society and Politics*, DOI: 10.1080/13608746.2014.887240, p. 8.

⁴ Delia BALDASSARRI, *The Simple Art of Voting: The Cognitive Shortcuts of Italian Voters*, Oxford Scholarship Online: January 2013, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199828241.001.0001.

⁵ In the first round, November 2012, Bersani obtained 44,9% of the votes, Renzi 35,5%, Vendola 15,6%, Puppato 2,6%, Tabacchi 1,4%. In the second ballot, December 2012, Bersani won with 60,9% against Renzi (39,1%).

⁶ The following year, the debate between the three competitors for the leadership of the PD was followed by three million people, with a share of 3%. Young people aged 25-34 represented the most important segment of the spectators.

and to the propensity of the voters to process information based on the cognitive shortcut of the image of the leader.

Along with this shortcut, the other key shortcut that oriented the voters in the 2013 elections was protest. The economic and institutional crisis described above; the withdrawal of the Berlusconi government followed by the Monti government and his unpopular reforms; the difficulty of the traditional parties to profile themselves as responsible and responsive actors towards the electorate and their grievances: all these elements contributed in creating an exceedingly negative climate of opinion with regards to the political elites. According to a study by the Demos research center, the trust of the Italian people in their political institutions for the past five years was at an all-time low¹. As already stated, the main beneficiary of this discouraging state of affairs and the negative perspectives for the future was Beppe Grillo and his Five Star Movement.

In 2010 – after various years of political activism in different local elections through the presentation of “Civic lists” of candidates with no previous party experience – Grillo decided to found the Five Star Movement². Together with a particular interest in local problems and the search for sustainable solutions, the issues of the M5S were the same as those that characterized his theater shows and his initial participation in political life: a call for a radical change in the political and economic elite, the denouncing of scandals and corruption and an irreverent description of the major political parties.

Promising electoral results were achieved in the local elections in 2010 and 2011. The 2012 local elections, with the election of the M5S mayor of the city of Parma³, confirmed this positive trend. Having declared his hostility towards all established parties⁴, the M5S was free to run an electoral campaign as an absolute outsider. The blog run by Beppe Grillo contained continuous irreverent references to the “PDL and PDmenoELLE” (“PDL and PD without L”) thus linguistically suggesting the equivalence of the two main Italian political parties, and stressing his own uniqueness and innovative character⁵. Nonetheless, since the autumn of 2012 the Movement encountered political difficulties. In September, the accusation of lack of internal democracy gained high levels of media attention after the “off the air” comments of local administrator and long-term member of M5S – Giovanni Favia – denouncing Grillo and Casaleggio’s authoritarian management of the Movement⁶. The accusation also made reference to Grillo’s prohibition to the M5S members to participate in television shows. Following a clear directive of the Movement, with few exceptions,

¹ In 2005, the index of trust (calculated as the mean of the interviewed people declaring a high or very high trust in political institutions such as: the local government, the European Union, the State, the President of the Republic, the political parties, the Parliament) was 41%, compared with 24% of 2013. Demos, RAPPORTO GLI ITALIANI E LO STATO – 2013. <http://www.demos.it/rapporto.php>.

² Pier Giorgio CORBETTA, Elisabetta GUALMINI (eds.), *Il partito di Grillo*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2013.

³ Roberto BIORCIO, Paolo NATALE, *Politica a 5 stelle*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2013.

⁴ http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/06/comunicato_politico_numero_cinquantuno.html.

⁵ Fabio BORDIGNON, Luigi CECCARINI, “Five Stars and a Cricket. Beppe Grillo Shakes the Italian Politics”, *South European Society and Politics*, 2013, <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fses20>, p. 10.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

neither Grillo nor any other M5S members participated in talk shows¹.

The denunciation of a lack of internal democracy and the boycott of political shows both contributed to increase the attention – sometimes a feverish media concentration – given to the M5S and its leader. The political “communicates” of his blog were continuously quoted, as well as extracts from the few interviews Grillo conceded to the foreign press. The prohibition to participate in television programs and talk shows imposed by Grillo on M5S candidates and members reflected a twofold strategy. On the one hand, Grillo was the only one who could truly represent the unsatisfied citizens. This was a guarantee that his message could be interpreted only as he had originally planned. On the other hand, given the limited public space where the voice of the leader could be heard obliged the press and television to reproduce the message in his original “packaging”, by making reference to the blog or to Grillo’s favorite occasions of going public.

Despite the M5S’s centrality in the media, the claim to fulfill the promise of a direct democracy that had been essential in the process of identity-building of the Movement called for a pragmatic response to the accusation of a lack of internal democracy. In view of the upcoming 2013 general elections, one of the principal problems that came to the fore regarded the selection of the candidates for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. As in the case of the PD, the organization of the so-called *parlamentarie*² elicited considerable attention by the media and the public. The *parlamentarie* were held between 3 and 6 December 2012 and were organized as on-line consultations. With the call for primary elections in order to select all candidates for the two Chambers of the Parliament, the M5S wanted to show its opposition to the Italian electoral law based on given lists of candidates normally decided by the party secretaries. As a matter of fact, the direct choice of candidates by voters had been a core issue for the Movement since the signature collection organized in occasion of the so-called “V Day” rally in Turin, 2007³.

In the days preceding the online consultation, the attention of those sympathizing with the M5S, as well as opposing parties and the media was centered on the process of deciding what rules were to be adopted. Individuals entitled to take part as voters were defined as those – over 18 – who had joined the Movement before September 30, 2012⁴. Criticism was expressed towards the timing of the voting. Online voting was possible only at certain hours of the day (from 10:00 to 17:00 Monday the 3rd and Thursday the 5th, and 10:00-21:00 the 4th; 10:00-20:00 the 6th)⁵. Grillo stressed the fact that, unlike the primary elections held by the PD, the *parlamentarie* were free of

¹ This rule is still valid for elected Mps. See http://www.beppegrillo.it/movimento/codice_comportamento_parlamentare.php under the section “Communication”.

² This is the name given by Beppe Grillo to the primary elections (*primarie* in Italian) for the Parliament.

³ “V” stood for “Vaffanculo”, which in Italian means “Fuck off”. On the occasion of the V Day, rallies were organized in two hundred Italian squares and a signature collection was carried out: 1) to prevent sentenced individuals to be elected in Parliament; 2) to establish a maximum of two mandates in Parliament; 3) to ask for the abolishment of the current electoral law, and to promote the direct choice of representatives by the people. 350.000 signatures were collected on 8 September 2007 in the main square of Bologna (Fabio BORDIGNON, Luigi CECCARINI, “Five Stars and a Cricket...cit.”, p. 4).

⁴ http://www.beppegrillo.it/movimento/regole_politiche_2013.php#candidati.

⁵ http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/12/le_parlamentarie.html.

charge. The passive electorate consisted of all those individuals over 25 who had already taken part in local elections under a "certified" M5S list, or under a 5S "Lista Civica". Individuals holding an elected office as of October 29, 2012, could not be candidates. The candidates could present themselves online by posting their CV on their electoral page and a short presentation video on YouTube. Most of them made use of this possibility by recording non-professional videos where they declared their political aims and presented their political lack of experience as a proof of legitimacy with regards to the Movement and the electorate.

The final numbers of those participating in the *Parlamentarie* was declared by Grillo himself¹. Out of 255.339 members registered, only 31.612 respected the criteria for participation, so there were finally 20.252 voters (each of them could express three votes). This means that approximately 12,5% of the members were entitled to vote. Among the members with the right to vote, the turnout was two thirds.

The limited numbers of participants, together with the low representativeness of the elected candidates, were sharply criticized, both by the media and the opposing parties. Nonetheless, the entire communication process was a success in term of media coverage. Despite the absence of Grillo and other members of the M5S from mainstream media, the M5S *parlamentarie* had a high media rating. As in the case of the primaries held by PD one month before, the essential feature was the dramatization of the electoral communication. The primary elections of the PD and the M5S were not held at the same level: the PD used primary elections in order to choose the coalition leader², the M5S selected its candidates for the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Nonetheless, this disparity in the level did not influence the perception of the stakes and both competitions were described in extremely spectacular and dramatic tones.

The pre-campaign period was dominated not only by the leader and the procedure for the selection of candidates, but by the more generic issue of coalition-building and its communication to the electorate. If the primary elections had witnessed the undisputable prominence of PD and M5S, the parties that had not made use of primary elections dominated in the media thanks to the never-ending disputes on party-alliances. The end of the bipolar system³ was ratified when Prime Minister Monti chose to run for election at the head of a centrist coalition ("Con Monti per l'Italia"). The decision was taken at the end of December 2012 after a long period of uncertainty, and the symbol of the party (*Scelta Civica*, SC) was presented at the beginning of January.

Monti's resolution followed the PDL's decision to withdraw its support from the government. The parliamentary declaration made by the secretary of the PDL, Angelino Alfano, also made clear, after months of ambiguity and contradictory declarations, who the leader of the PDL would be. Despite Berlusconi's television announcement at the end of October 2012, in which he had announced his decision not to run for the forthcoming elections and to organize the primary election for the next December, the scenario changed rapidly and frequently, thus disorienting the center-right voters, who eventually found their leader again in Silvio Berlusconi.

¹ http://www.beppegrillo.it/2012/12/le_buffonarie.html#commenti.

² The PD organized primary elections for the selection of the parliamentary candidates too, but the voting system was much more complicated and the resonance much lower.

³ Guido LEGNANTE, Paolo MANCINI, Gianpietro MAZZOLENI, Franca RONCAROLO, "La campagna elettorale sui media", in ITANES, *Voto amaro....cit.*, p. 34.

The pre-campaign phase was characterized by the contraposition of a more stable positioning of the center-left parties and the M5S (at least from the point of view of the coalition formation of the center left and the decision of the M5S not to make any alliances with other political parties) and the uncertainty and flip flop declarations of Prime Minister Mario Monti not only regarding the coalition formation, but also with reference to its leadership. The same can be stated for Silvio Berlusconi's belated decision to run himself in the elections at the head of the center-right coalition.

To sum up, the pre-campaign climate presented many innovations for the Italian voters. The main novelties consisted in: (i) the end of the bipolar mechanics – for the first time since 1994 a third central pole¹ led by the incumbent Prime Minister Monti existed along with the center-right and the center left coalitions; (ii) the existence of a leadership without a candidature² – as a matter of fact, the M5S was a non-coalitionable movement with a leader, Beppe Grillo, who presented himself as the "megaphone" of the Movement, without however being a candidate either for parliament or for Prime Minister; (iii) the late candidature of Silvio Berlusconi – after being the undisputed leader of the center-right coalition for almost two decades, the official candidature of Berlusconi came late; (iv) the "communication prevalence" of the center-left, at least in terms of positive visibility, thanks to the long-term effects of the primary elections, and finally (v) the unprecedented phenomenon of the media trying to keep up with one of the main actors of the political campaign: the M5S.

In the next section, we will analyze how these features have been affecting developments in the campaign phase, and whether the involved parties have efficiently reacted to their initial conditions.

The Political Campaign: Main Parties, Issues and Techniques

After describing the pre-campaign phase, we will now turn to the analysis of the campaign weeks by focusing on the communication strategies of the main parties and coalitions³, and on the use of the media by parties and voters.

As we have already stated, the 2013 campaign was a mixture of professionalism and traditionalism. Despite the emphasis on the modernization and Americanization of the electoral campaign, the 2013 Italian general elections have proved that professionalism does not always pay in terms of electoral result. From a theoretical point of view, the most professionalized campaign should have been the one of the Prime Minister's party, SC, at the head of the coalition "Con Monti per l'Italia". The

¹ The coalition consisted in an alliance of Prime Minister Monti's party, *Scelta Civica* (SC), the *Unione di Centro* (UDC), *Futuro e Libertà* (FLI).

² Guido LEGNANTE et al., "La campagna elettorale sui media", cit., p. 34.

³ Though interesting, we have decided not to take into account the communication strategies of the minor coalitions and parties. Among them, *Rivoluzione Civile* (RC) led by the former Judge Antonio Ingroia, who was at the edge of an alliance of the radical left; the *Lega Nord* (LN), under the new leadership of Roberto Maroni, had been a very important political party of the center-right spectrum since the last years of the so-called First Republic and which ran in coalition with the center-right; "Fare per fermare il decline" was the name given to a coalition of minor lists under the guide of the economic journalist Oscar Giannino, who presented himself with a liberal economic program.

party decided to hire David Axelrod, Obama's famous strategist, for the electoral campaign. If the Monti Government and the figure of the Prime Minister had been initially characterized by high levels of approval¹ thanks to the Prime Minister's unprecedented sober style in the first months of his office, the highest risk during the electoral campaign consisted in the fact that this moderate style might not pay off.

The preoccupation was that the Prime Minister's rigor, both in terms of personal profiling and the policies implemented during his 15 months term, as well as the continuous uncertainty about his candidature, might be considered an obstacle for his new image as candidate. The strategy suggested by the team of international consultants consisted in the creation of a more empathetic personality but it was implemented too rapidly. Monti's participation in television talk shows and his appearance in the social networks came across as being incoherent with his personality as incumbent.

The wrong choice in the personalization strategy together with an unclear definition of the aims of the new political project eventually determined an electoral result lower than expected. The poor electoral results of the SC and its coalition are particularly evident if we take into account the high media coverage of the Prime Minister during the weeks of the electoral campaign. As a matter of fact, Monti obtained the highest coverage in the press (*Corriere della Sera*, *La Repubblica*, *Il Giornale*, *Il Sole 24 Ore*) and the second highest on television (Tg1, Tg2, Tg3, Tg4, Tg5, Studio Aperto, Tg La7)².

The runner up in coverage was Silvio Berlusconi. Despite all controversies related to his candidature and his late decision to run as front candidate of the center-right coalition, Silvio Berlusconi was able to attract the highest visibility on television, and the second best in the press. His participation in television shows represented a valid opportunity for him and his coalition to bridge the gap between the center-right and the center-left coalition. From the beginning of the electoral campaign all opinion polls indicated the center-left coalition as being in a pole position. Berlusconi was able to dictate the issues of the campaign. Within the general frame of the economic crisis, the leader of the center-right coalition imposed the agenda with his proposals on the local property tax (IMU) and the fiscal pressure³. These themes had always been at the center of the center-right political program, and reflected the preoccupations of the Italian voters in the economic crisis. The high media-coverage of Berlusconi's proposals was not sufficient to guarantee a good electoral result. The center-right coalition lost about half of the votes in comparison to the 2008 elections. Nonetheless, the continuous reference to the increasing approval index of the center-right itself represented an issue of the campaign⁴.

On the contrary, the center-left coalition lead by Bersani was unable to capitalize on the communication success of the primary elections. Despite the advantage

¹ Monica POLETTI, Paolo SEGATTI, "La sfida di Scelta Civica al bipolarismo", in ITANES, *Voto amaro...cit.*, p. 96.

² Guido LEGNANTE et al., "La campagna elettorale sui media", cit., p. 39.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 40.

⁴ Recent analysis of the issues of the electoral campaign show that the so called "campaign issues", that is the issues related to the coverage of parties' and politicians' campaign strategies, choices, and themes, were prevailing in the television, Patrizia LAURANO, "Temi, protagonisti e formati della campagna elettorale per le Politiche 2013", paper presented at the XXVII SISP General Conference, Florence, September 12-14 2013, Panel "Television and Politics", available at <http://www.sisp.it/convegno/2013/paper/376/>, p. 13.

indicated by the opinion polls, Bersani did not follow the political marketing rule¹, and gave the impression of interpreting the electoral campaign as a follower and not the leader. The leader of the center-left coalition tried to preserve the advantage ratified by the opinion polls without "coup de theatre, striking events, easy slogans"². Bersani did not make use of efficient media coverage of his television presence and public appearances, did not promote himself after his victory at the primary elections, used a redundant political language that became one of the most popular targets of political satire, and was unable to impose his agenda both with regards to the media and the electorate. The more general problem of the PD consisted in its incapacity to communicate a credible government profile for the solution of the most urgent problems of the country³.

The real leading figure of the electoral campaign, despite his absence from television and talk shows, was Beppe Grillo. Post electoral studies show that the coverage received by Grillo and the M5S both in the press and on the television news⁴ was lower. Nevertheless his mixture of traditional communication consisting of rallies in Italian piazzas and on the web turned out to be the winning formula, guaranteeing him an unexpected electoral success. Grillo made an unprecedented use of his theatre capacities, which permitted him to be perceived as a real political outsider. His "belligerent" and often vulgar political language⁵, his unrelenting criticism of the political elite, a particularly telling use of his storytelling gifts and his strategy of not making alliances with other parties created an efficient frame for the M5S "Tsunami tour". The name itself is indicative: the "Tsunami tour" lasted forty days and Grillo travelled from the North to the South with rallies in seventy-seven Italian squares. As in the pages of Beppe Grillo's blog,

"Nothing will be like it used to be. The tour will be followed by a web channel 12 hours a day. Its name will be 'La cosa' (The thing), like the 'thing from another world', the one of direct democracy. The M5S takes part in elections with the whole System against it, so dramatically and unanimously that the information becomes grotesque, surreal, Soviet and Pol Pot style"⁶.

During the weeks of the electoral campaign, Grillo focused on the anti-establishment issues typical of the Movement's political mission, exploited the voters' grievances towards the immobility of the political class both of the right and of the left and refused any right-left collocation. This proved to be a strategic decision. While analysis of the 2012 local elections had underscored the fact that most M5S electors came from the ranges of the center-left parties⁷, recent analysis of the 2013 general elections show a strong capacity of the Movement to attract both the Center-Right and the Center Left.

¹ Marco CACCIOTTO, *Marketing politico...*cit.

² Ilvo DIAMANTI, *Un salto nel voto*, Laterza, Roma, 2013, p. 157.

³ Cristiano VEZZONI, "Perché il Pd ha perso le elezioni", in ITANES, *Voto amaro...*cit., p. 92.

⁴ Guido LEGNANTE et al., "La campagna elettorale sui media", cit.

⁵ Giovanna COSENZA, "Come comunica Grillo. Dal turpiloquio al linguaggio del corpo", *Comunicazione Politica*, no. 1, 2013, pp. 109-124.

⁶ http://www.beppegrillo.it/2013/01/tsunami_tour.html, author's translation from Italian.

⁷ Pier Giorgio CORBETTA, Elisabetta GUALMINI (eds.) *Il partito di Grillo*, cit., p. 105.

The 2013 electoral results obtained by the M5S in the general elections (25,6% of the electorate at the Chamber of Deputies, 23,6% at the Senate) came as a shock for the Italian party system and bore witness to the modification of the communication strategies of both the Italian parties and the Italian electorate.

Old and New: Television and Internet

The electoral campaign testified to the persistence of television as the main information source for Italian voters¹. Even if the consumption of television in terms of hours has diminished, the television news and the talk shows still represent the main source of information for Italian voters. As previously stated, the use of Internet and of the social networks increased in the 2013 elections, mainly among the younger voters. It is however opportune to talk about a phenomenon of hybridization, rather than one of substitution, when we take into account the media consumption of the Italian electorate².

The use of the Internet is increasing in general terms: 29 million Italians surf the net at least once a month. Among them, approximately 23 million people have a Facebook account and 3 million are using Twitter³. This is a significant trend. Still, it is important to verify whether the use of the Internet was also political. Recent studies show that 18,4% of the electorate, out of 30,3% of the Italian Internet users, used the web for obtaining information about the electoral campaign⁴.

Among the regular users of the social networks, it is important to differentiate between Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is much more popular than Twitter, but between 2011 and 2012 the latter has rapidly become a favorite niche for Italian politicians and candidates⁵. Its reception by Italian voters has been recently analyzed⁶. Researchers have estimated that among the Italian users of Twitter⁷, about 8% have used the social network to discuss politics on-line, and it is still unclear what resonance on-line twitting may have had offline.

Still, in the 2013 campaign election, Italian politicians used the Internet to a much greater extent than in the previous elections. Among the privileged strategies of the "twitting" Italian politicians, the use of an aphoristic style (in order to sum up the politician's opinion on one issue in 140 characters) has been interpreted as a way of communicating political messages not only to the general followers, but also to

¹ Cristian VACCARI, Augusto VALERIANI, Pablo BARBERÁ, Richard BONNEAU, John T. JOST, Jonathan NAGLER, Joshua TUCKER, "Social Media and Political Communication. A Survey of Twitter Users during the 2013 Italian General Election", *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica*, no. 3, 2013, pp. 381-409; Guido LEGNANTE et al., "La campagna elettorale sui media", cit.

² Sara BENTIVEGNA, Luigi CECCARINI, "Web, giovani e voto", in ITANES, *Voto amaro...*cit., p. 193.

³ Giovanna COSENZA, "I politici italiani su Twitter. Fra esagerazioni, pasticci e qualche buon risultato", *Comunicazione Politica*, no. 3, 2013, p. 300.

⁴ Sara BENTIVEGNA, Luigi CECCARINI, "Web, giovani e voto", cit., p. 195.

⁵ Giovanna COSENZA, "I politici italiani su Twitter...cit.", p. 300.

⁶ Cristian VACCARI et al., "Social Media and Political Communication...cit.".

⁷ 3.3 million Twitter accounts were active in October 2012; see Cristian VACCARI et al., "Social Media and Political Communication...cit.", p. 387.

the media, which not infrequently used the political tweets as if they were political announcements issued by the candidate's press office¹.

Apart from the diffusion of the use of Internet and social networks for political purposes, there is no doubt that the "Internet-factor" has never been so emphasized in the previous Italian elections. This is certainly due to the significance given to the online deliberative democracy by Beppe Grillo and the M5S, but also to the echo regarding the possibilities of increasing political participation and political inclusion through the Internet, which has been crucial since the Obama electoral campaigns.

The situation described above regarding the information strategies of both electors and candidates gives a genuine picture of the tensions manifest in political communication in Italy. Often, the stimulus for a rapid professionalization that characterizes outsider and challenger movements (*Forza Italia* at the beginning of the First Republic, the M5S nowadays) balances the conservative tensions of more traditional parties. The 2013 electoral campaign has proved that exceptions exist and that, along with the hybridization model of media consumption by the voters, new models of modernization are in view for parties and candidates.

¹ Giovanna COSENZA, "I politici italiani su Twitter...cit.", p. 306.